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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/22/2016  
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SUBJECT: EARLY OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE NEXT CONGRESS

REF: A. BOGOTA 2295  
[1](#)B. BOGOTA 1976

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Despite the resumption of a lame duck Congressional session that will run through June 20, the composition of the next Congress that takes office on July 20 is already center stage. A hypothetical Uribe II Administration (beginning August 7) would count on majorities in both houses, provided that none of the five major pro-Uribe parties defect. While some commentators predict that German Vargas' Radical Change party could break with Uribe, Embassy believes this is unlikely, at least for the first half of Uribe II. A new party cohesion law (Ley de Bancadas) will take effect on July 20, ideally making vote prediction easier. However, the law permits major loopholes, allowing parties to decide which issues to leave up to the conscience of individual members. End Summary.

NEXT CONGRESS IN JULY  
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[1](#)2. (U) The holdover Congress resumed on March 16, and will finish business on June 20. Owing to Presidential elections on May 28, coupled with parliamentary requirements for multiple rounds of voting on bills, little legislation of significance is expected in the current session. Individuals elected to Congress in March 12 voting will take office on July 20, and the next President on August 7.

CLEAR URIBE MAJORITIES  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) In a hypothetical (and highly probable) Uribe II, the President is set to count on majorities in both houses. The "big five" pro-Uribe parties -- National Unity (U), Conservative (PCC), Radical Change (CR), Wings-Team Colombia (A-EC), and Democratic Colombia (CD) -- will give Uribe 61 of 102 Senate seats and 88 of 166 House seats. In the House, the addition of two smaller movements, both strongly pro-Uribe, would give the President an additional six seats.

SOME QUESTION MARKS  
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[1](#)4. (SBU) While nascent parties Citizen Convergence (CC) and Colombia Alive (CV) publicly identified themselves as pro-Uribe during the campaign, recent interviews of the parties leaders, Senators Luis Alberto Gil and Habib Merheg, have cast some doubt on continued loyalty of both movements

to Uribe. CC will be allocated seven Senate and eight House seats, and CV two Senate seats. In a similar vein, the pro-Uribe status of the Liberal Opening (AL) movement, led by newly elected Representative Hector Lopez, whose mother (alias "La Gata") is currently in jail on corruption charges, is a question mark. AL will have five seats in the House.

¶5. (C) Commentators have speculated that CR head and Senator German Vargas Lleras, the top individual vote getter on March 12, might distance his movement from President Uribe after May 28. Long-standing tension between Uribe and Vargas Lleras (including Vargas Lleras' complaints about the GOC's response to the assassination attempt on his life in late 2005) and his desire to run for President in 2010 are considered potential motivations for a split. However, for at least the first half of an Uribe II (until the 2010 race begins to heat up), we estimate that Vargas Lleras will stay largely in the Uribe fold. Vargas Lleras strongly supports Uribe's Democratic Security policy, our bilateral extradition relationship, and the FTA. While he might break with Uribe on less important issues, we do not see Vargas Lleras charting a different course on these key agenda items. Furthermore, our CR contacts in the Congress tell us that most members would break with Vargas Lleras and CR in the event of an Uribe-Vargas Lleras rupture.

PARTY COHESION LAW: WAIT AND SEE  
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¶6. (C) The "Ley de Bancadas" will take effect on July 20, with the stated goals of improving party cohesion and streamlining Congressional debate. The law mandates that each member of Congress must vote according to the consensus adopted by his/her party. Parties will also be required to name a spokesperson in each house and select only a handful of approved speakers for debate on a particular piece of legislation. While the new law will almost certainly reduce the length of debate (and the room for parliamentary maneuver), the cohesion element may prove more elusive, as parties may decide which issues are "votes of conscience," in which members may break with the party line. For this reason, it is too early to predict the law's overall effect.

COMMENT  
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¶7. (C) Ref B noted that Uribe holds most of the cards in dealing with the Congress. The results of the March 12 Congressional elections do not change this view. Simple allegiance by the big five pro-Uribe parties will give the President the majorities he needs on most pieces of legislation. The Conservatives have broken ranks with Uribe in the past over fiscal issues. The party leadership has been unalterably opposed to tax reform, however much outside observers may agree it is urgent. Uribe's new proposals on tax reform may be a first test of party loyalty to Uribe.

WOOD